Well, John Henry said to the captain,  
“Oh a man ain’t nothin’ but a man.  
‘Fore I’d let your steam drill beat me down,  
Well, I’ll die with the hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord,  
I’ll die with the hammer in my hand.”

You may have heard the legend of John Henry. It’s the account of an epically strong, steel drivin’ railroad worker who outhammered a steam engine and lost his life in the process. It’s a fable pitting the work of human hands against technological efficiency in a battle of man versus machine. It’s a paean to the virtues of our everyday toil. Or it’s a cautionary tale about killing yourself with work. And it’s based on a real man from the 19th century, or several men...unless, of course, it’s all a myth. In all of its shifting meanings, this most American of folktales captures something about our national character. Just what it captures—and the story we tell about it—comprises the central inquiry of Steel Hammer, Anne Bogart and SITI Company’s latest project to premiere in the Humana Festival.

Though the tale of John Henry has taken a winding road from its Appalachian origins to today, Steel Hammer’s lineage is easier to trace. Before it became a piece for the theatre, Steel Hammer began its life as an experimental score of the same name, composed by Julia Wolfe. (The piece was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2010.) With her company, the international experimental music collective Bang on a Can, Wolfe approached Bogart with this proposal—to turn an art ballad examining the complicated history of the folk song “John Henry” into a work of music theatre. Bogart jumped at the chance to collaborate on this project. “I was intrigued by the John Henry story traveling over the years and being appropriated in so many different ways,” she relates. Indeed, the durable folktale has proven fertile ground for multiple interpretations, including one in particular that fascinated the director. “The song was used on railroad crews to set the rhythm of the stinting, when they hoisted the steel hammers,” Bogart notes, “and it was a reminder to slow down or you’d die. It was actually more a tool than an entertainment.”

That notion, of a story told not merely to please but for a specific purpose, inspired the theatrical conceit around which Steel Hammer is built: a storytelling contest. And to generate an array of approaches to John Henry’s tale that could fuel this contest, SITI Company commissioned four playwrights—Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux and Regina Taylor—to author their unique takes on this American legend. Bogart’s prompt for the writers was liberatingly simple: What is the story of John Henry in the way you’d like to tell it? From there, each was free to explore those aspects of the folktale that attracted them. “The John Henry story is just about the closest thing we have in America to Greek mythology,” Will Power explains. “And folktales, like the Greek myths, have all kinds of entry points.” Power believes this multiplicity of narratives is actually how traditional lore is designed—and how it speaks for the culture that produced it. “I think mythology is a collection of stories that tells the truth of a people,” the playwright continues. “There are all these different perspectives. And they’re all true.”

As Steel Hammer unfolds, the members of a diverse six-person ensemble step onto a platform and take turns telling their versions...